

**Testimony of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association  
Regarding SB 327 (school director elections)  
To the Senate Education Committee  
May 4, 2012**

Good afternoon. My name is Idette Groff, and I am a school director in the Conestoga Valley School District with over 12 years of service to my local board. In 2008, I received Master School Board Member accreditation from the Pennsylvania School Boards Association while serving as president of my board, which was awarded the Distinguished School Board designation that same year. I also am a member of the PSBA Board of Directors, representing numerous school districts of the south central part of the state.

Thank you for this opportunity for the Pennsylvania School Boards Association to comment on Senate Bill 327, which would revise the election process by abolishing primary elections for school director nominations, with board members elected at the November municipal elections. It also requires nomination papers for school directors to be filed without regard to political party membership, and requires nomination papers to include a minimum number of signatures by qualified electors without regard to political party affiliation in various increments depending on the class of school district. *(250 for a school district of the first class; 200 for a school district of the first class A; 100 for a school district of the second class; 50 for a school district of the third class; and 25 for a school district of the fourth class)*

School boards are charged with the critical task of governing our nation's public school systems, and our members take this charge seriously. Like you, PSBA believes that the ultimate goal of public education is to provide opportunities for learning, growth and achievement for all public school students. Effective school governance is essential for attaining this goal as well as promoting the community's trust in public education and ensuring responsible stewardship of resources. This responsibility motivates individuals to run for a seat on their local school boards, and we believe that ensuring student success should be the goal without regard to political party affiliation.

PSBA believes that board member elections should be based on educational issues that reflect the best intentions for the needs of students – not political party considerations. At the same time, however, the current election process does have the advantage of enabling the public to learn more about the qualifications and positions of school board candidates on educational

issues. Primary elections have an important purpose – they extend the time for voters to learn more about the candidates, and permit voters to narrow the field to those they believe are the most knowledgeable, and best represent their needs and interests.

PSBA’s legislative platform does not specifically address the situation related to elections that is raised by Senate Bill 327. However, in an informal survey of PSBA members that was taken in 2010, responses were divided on the question of whether primary elections for school directors should be eliminated. The responses for and against the question, and the various reasons for both, reflects the diverse election environments across the state and highlights the fact that many communities feel a strong connection to their local school board. This question will be asked again to our members in an upcoming survey this spring. With this in mind, while PSBA cannot take a specific position on Senate Bill 327 at this time, we would like to take this opportunity raise some questions and concerns before this committee as it considers the implications of the proposed legislation prior to taking action.

First, we could not identify any research on Pennsylvania school board elections that demonstrates heavy partisanship, the costs of school board primary elections, statewide or individually, being extraordinary, or substantial partisan political contributions to school board elections. More specifically, we believe that provisions of Senate Bill 327 may have both intended and unintended consequences including, but not limited to:

- A larger field of school director candidates on the November ballot could result in voter confusion and difficulty in making an informed choice. It is critical that the school directors that are elected are truly representative of their communities and constituents.
- There would be substantially less vetting of candidates. The elimination of a primary would not reduce the number of candidates running in the general election to a more manageable number. This would reduce the public’s opportunities for sufficient time to learn more about the qualifications and positions of candidates on education issues.
- A November election may increase the possibility of school board candidates aligning themselves with party slates – even if their names appear on a separate non-partisan section of the ballot.

- Some districts may have difficulty attracting candidates to run. Results from a 2011 PSBA survey revealed that 10% of the 362 school districts that responded to the survey did not have enough candidates file to fill all positions on the school board. Further restrictions imposed by Senate Bill 327 could result in an even greater shortage of school directors for some districts.
- The bill may discourage interest by candidates because they could face more difficulty in collecting a much larger number of the requisite number of signatures. This could include those candidates who are not backed by larger organized groups of citizens, parents, taxpayers, etc. who have an interest in the school board. Currently, a potential school board candidate must file a petition signed by at least 10 qualified voters of the district for the political party with which the petition will be filed. In order to cross-file in a primary election, a petition must be circulated separately for both parties. While Senate Bill 327 implements a tiered system for the number of signatures required by qualified electors, regardless of political party, to sign nomination papers for the potential school board member, some of these numbers of required signatures still seem large considering the comparative number required in municipal elections in small towns and boroughs, and the smaller size and rural nature of some school districts. Additionally, it may be significantly more difficult in those districts that elect regional, not at-large, school directors to collect signatures within the same timeframe.
- The questions become, on a statewide basis, does this bill as it currently reads remove unnecessary political influences or just change the timeline, crowd the field, and camouflage the best candidates? Does it help attract the best candidates or discourage them from this vital volunteer position with excess barriers?

PSBA agrees with this committee that school board members must focus on the student achievement and fiscal issues that fill the landscape of public schools. In fact, research<sup>1</sup> conducted at the national level shows that there is a connection between the work of highly effective school boards and the positive achievement of students in their schools. There is no room for politics in quality, results-driven school systems. We don't question the intent to remove politics by allowing cross-filing and understand it may not have had the expected results.

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<sup>1</sup> Information Briefing: [The Lighthouse Research: Past, Present, and Future](http://www.schoolboardresearch.org/content/document/detail/760/)  
(<http://www.schoolboardresearch.org/content/document/detail/760/>)

Successful systems are governed by well-trained and ethical leaders that include the board and administrators working together for the students they serve. Therefore, our focus and our initiatives have been on helping school boards to be highly effective and lead the way for improved student achievement. To that end, PSBA provides board development and administrator training on a wide variety of areas. In addition, the association created Standards for Effective School Governance and a companion Code of Conduct for Members of Pennsylvania School Boards that have been adopted by nearly 500 school entities.

PSBA acknowledges the desire for nonpartisan school boards. The quality of the individuals elected far outweighs the specific process by which they are elected. One approach to achieve this goal would be to continue to conduct a primary election but eliminate any party affiliation to the candidate's name on the ballot.

Of key importance is the direct relationship between high student achievement and the effectiveness of a school entity's governing board of directors. With such critical outcomes at stake, PSBA believes that voters need adequate time and opportunity to learn as much as possible about those who want to run their public schools. The decisions made by school directors deeply affect students, teachers, parents and taxpayers. Serving on a school board requires a commitment of energy, time and talent to work as a team to help the students in the community. Voters should have every opportunity to vet the candidates in order to make informed choices.

PSBA suggests that the various issues and approaches related to nonpartisan and/or primary elections could be further studied through the work of a task force that could conduct its work and prepare a report with recommendations to this committee within a year. Such a task force should be comprised of school directors and other elected officials, as well as officials from county boards of election, the department of state and other stakeholders. Among the duties of the task force would be to examine how school boards are selected in other states and consider the various processes that are used, and what systems seems to be the most effective. Its report could then be used by this committee to weigh these issues very carefully before taking action to make a major change in our election process.

There are many variations for election processes among the states that may be of interest to the committee as it considers this issue. For example:

- In the state of Washington school director is a nonpartisan office that is only on the ballot in odd-numbered years. There is no primary if only one or two candidates file and the race only appears on the general election ballot. If three or more candidates file, then

there is a primary and the two candidates who receive the most votes advance to the general election.

- In Minnesota, districts choose odd or even numbered years for school board elections. A school board may, by resolution adopted by April 15 of any year, decide to choose nominees by a primary. The resolution is effective for all ensuing elections of board members in the district until it is revoked. If the board decides to conduct a primary and if there are more than two candidates or more than twice as many candidates as there are positions available, the district must hold a primary. The primary is held in August in the year when the general election is held.
- In New Jersey, communities may move their school elections from April to November. Adopting the change places school board candidates on the November general election ballot and eliminates the requirement that a school board submit its proposed budget to the voters as long as it remains at or below the state's 2% levy cap. As a result, over 85% of the state's elected school boards will now hold school elections in November.
- In Arkansas, school board elections are conducted in September with no primary or party affiliation. In Alaska, elections are held in October of each year. In Oklahoma, school board elections are held in February; if no candidate receives 50% or more of the vote during the February election, a runoff election is held between the two candidates with the most votes in the first election.
- In Michigan, local districts choose from among dates allowed by the state. Elections are held mostly in May, although some conduct elections in November.

These are just a few examples of the different approaches used by states. Certainly, a more thorough study of election processes would be helpful to the committee. In conclusion, I thank you for this opportunity to speak to the committee. We look forward to working with you on this and other issues of mutual concern.



## **PSBA Standards for Effective School Governance**

### **To promote student growth and achievement, an effective school board . . .**

#### **Advocates for a thorough and efficient system of public education by:**

- a. Promoting public education as a keystone of democracy.
- b. Engaging and promoting community support by seeking input, building support networks and generating action.
- c. Allocating resources in a manner designed to facilitate student achievement consistent with school district goals and plans.
- d. Maintaining legislative awareness and communicating with members of local, state and federal legislative bodies.
- e. Ensuring strong management of the school system by hiring, setting goals with and evaluating the superintendent.
- f. Employing qualified staff to meet student and program needs.

#### **Models responsible governance and leadership by:**

- a. Staying current with changing needs and requirements by reviewing educational literature, attending professional development opportunities prior to board service and continuously during board service, and preparing to make informed decisions.
- b. Interacting with school officials in other districts and using resources provided by organizations and agencies committed to effective governance and management of public schools.
- c. Leading with respect and taking full responsibility for board activity and behavior.
- d. Adopting and acting in accordance with the PSBA Code of Conduct for Members of Pennsylvania School Boards.
- e. Engaging all community stakeholders.
- f. Complying with board policy and all applicable local, state and federal laws and regulations.
- g. Operating as a collective board in making decisions.
- h. Participating in annual board retreats.

#### **Governs through policy by:**

- a. Seeking input from stakeholders and following an established procedure for consideration.
- b. Regularly reviewing and, as necessary, revising and adopting board policy.
- c. Delegating to the superintendent responsibility for implementation of board policy.
- d. Ensuring public access to adopted board policy.
- e. Purposefully linking its actions to applicable board policies.

**Ensures that effective planning occurs by:**

- a. Adopting and implementing a collaborative strategic planning process, including regular reviews.
- b. Setting annual goals that are aligned with the strategic plan.
- c. Linking board actions to the strategic plan.
- d. Adopting a financial plan that considers short-term and long-term needs.
- e. Adopting professional development plans for board and staff.
- f. Adopting a plan to ensure evaluation of student growth and achievement using relevant data.
- g. Adopting a master facilities plan conducive to teaching and learning.
- h. Adopting a plan for curriculum review and development.

**Monitors results by:**

- a. Using data appropriately to make informed decisions.
- b. Ensuring effective practices for evaluation of staff, programs, plans and services.
- c. Evaluating its own performance.
- d. Assessing student growth and achievement.
- e. Evaluating the effectiveness of the strategic plan.

**Communicates with and engages the community by:**

- a. Distributing relevant information about the district.
- b. Providing methods of communication to the board and appropriate staff.
- c. Seeking input through a variety of methods.
- d. Including stakeholders in all communications.



## **PSBA Code of Conduct for Members of Pennsylvania School Boards**

### **PREAMBLE**

**We, as members of our local board of education, representing all the residents of our school district, believe that:**

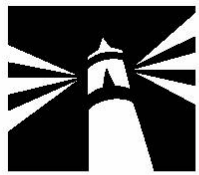
- Striving toward ideal conditions for effective school board service to our community, in a spirit of teamwork and devotion to public education, is the greatest instrument for preserving and perpetuating our representative democracy.
- The future welfare of this community, commonwealth and nation depends upon the quality of education we provide in the public schools.
- In order to maintain a free and strong country, our civic obligation to the community, commonwealth and nation is to maintain free and strong public schools in the United States of America, without surrendering our responsibilities to any other person, group or organization.
- Boards of school directors share responsibility for ensuring a "thorough and efficient system of public education" as required by the Pennsylvania Constitution.
- Our fellow residents have entrusted us with the advocacy for and stewardship of the education of the youth of this community.
- The public expects that our first and greatest priority is to provide equitable educational opportunities for all youth.

### **Accordingly,**

- The community should be provided with information about its schools and be engaged by the board and staff to encourage input and support for the school system. Devoting time, thought and study to our duties and responsibilities as school board members is critical for rendering effective and credible service.
- Board members should work together in a spirit of harmony, respect and cooperation, despite differences of opinion.
- Personal decisions should be based upon all sufficient facts, we should vote our honest conviction without partisan bias, and we will abide by and uphold the majority decision of the board.

- Individuals have no legal authority outside the meetings of the board, and should conduct their relationships with all stakeholders and media on this basis.
- We will not use our positions as school directors to benefit ourselves or any individual or agency.
- School boards must balance their responsibility to provide educational programs with the need to be effective stewards of public resources.
- We should recognize that the primary responsibility of the board is to adopt policies by which the schools are to be administered.
- We should respect that the superintendent of schools and his or her staff are responsible and accountable for the delivery of the educational programs and the conduct of school operations.
- Communication with all stakeholders and the media should be conducted in accordance with board policy.

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# Information Briefing

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## IOWA SCHOOL BOARDS FOUNDATION

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### **The Lighthouse Research: Past, Present, and Future School Board Leadership for Improving Student Achievement**

The history of education reform in the U.S. shows some evidence of success in improving education at the classroom and school levels but little evidence that those successes were able to extend or sustain beyond the individual classroom or the school involved in the improvement effort. If the United States is to achieve the excellence and equity in public education that is our promised goal, it is essential that we find the keys to broadening excellence to the district and state level and identify the key leaders for this level of impact.

The Lighthouse Research focuses on the role of local school boards and superintendents in leading and sustaining districtwide high and equitable student achievement. School boards are charged with decisions that impact what students learn, how students are taught, how learning is measured, how teachers are supported with professional development, how funds are focused on district priorities, and how effectively the community is engaged around student learning. While, by their nature school boards are removed from the day-to-day work of teaching and learning, they control the conditions that can allow successful teaching and learning to occur throughout the system.

This document summarizes the three phases of Lighthouse research to date, providing an overview of the purpose, the process, and the findings specific to each phase. The Lighthouse Multi-State Project: School Board Leadership for Student Achievement is Phase 3 of the overall Lighthouse Research, currently underway.

**Original Lighthouse Study (1998 – 2000): (LH 1) An ethnographic study of school districts generating unusually high levels of student achievement and school districts with similar characteristics but generating significantly lower levels of student achievement.**

- **Purpose:** Research has repeatedly shown that some teachers, some schools, some curricula, and some instructional methods generate higher achievement than others. The question this study attempted to answer was, “Do some school boards generate higher achievement than others? If so, do they do so through patterns of organizational behavior that can be described and learned by others?”
- **Process:** Researchers looked first for districts with extremely different levels of student achievement but similar in other characteristics such as socio-economic status, size, location, etc; and then conducted individual interviews with board members, superintendents, district level administrators, principals, and teachers to learn about their school improvement efforts (what they were trying to improve, how they were trying to improve it, and what was influencing the change).

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- **Findings** showed that school boards in districts with a history of higher student achievement were significantly different in knowledge, beliefs and actions from the boards in the lower achieving districts. This study became one of the first and only studies that made a credible research-based connection between the work of the school board and levels of student achievement.

**The Iowa Lighthouse Project (2002 – 2007): (LH 2) A five-year, federally funded inquiry into the role of the local governance team in districtwide efforts to improve student achievement.**

- **Purpose:** To build upon the findings of the first Lighthouse study and identify the ways in which local school boards influence the conditions for success that are necessary to improve student achievement. This project also identified the types of development and supports school boards need in order to have a positive impact on district efforts to improve student achievement.
- **Process:** Researchers worked with the boards and superintendents in five pilot school districts in Iowa over a period of 5 years while studying the changes in specific conditions that support improvement, changes in beliefs, and changes in student achievement.
- **Findings:** Results from 4 years of work in 5 pilot districts reveal significant learning about key behaviors of the board/superintendent team that influence district effort to improve achievement. As a result of this phase, the research team was able to describe five main roles of the board, seven key areas of performance boards demonstrate as they play these roles, the knowledge, skills and beliefs necessary to perform in these ways, and effective strategies for board development related to the board roles. Areas such as creating a sense of urgency, developing a districtwide focus for improvement, creating conditions within the system for success, monitoring progress, deliberative policy development, and developing a leadership continuum have influenced board behaviors and the practices and beliefs of district staff in these pilot districts. Evidence of impact includes:
  - All sites participating in this project have shown significant improvement in one or more indicators of specific conditions necessary for improving student achievement;
  - On average, 91% of all staff and board members across all sites say that there is a clear and focused goal in their district for improving student achievement;
  - In 4 of the 5 sites, data show an increase of 48-90% of all staff and the board who could consistently describe the district's school improvement goals;
  - In all sites, 83-100% of all staff and the board indicate that there is a clear district-wide focus on improving literacy;
  - In 3 of the 5 sites, the amount of time spent in regular board meetings on policy and student achievement issues increased from an average of 16% to an average of 37%;
  - The boards in all 5 districts are regularly allocating additional board work session time to focus exclusively on student achievement issues;
  - By year 3, all districts indicate strong agreement that frequently monitoring student achievement, ensuring children's earliest school success, and partnering with the community are critical for improving teaching and learning;
  - By year 3, all districts indicate strong agreement that local school boards can positively impact student achievement;
  - In year 3, significant gains on a measure of reading comprehension were seen at every grade level in one district with an average of 94% of the students K-12 scoring average or above;
  - In year 4, 4 of the 5 sites showed significant gains in student reading and/or math at at least 2 grade levels over the course of 5 years.



**The Lighthouse Multi-State Project: School Board Leadership for Student Achievement: (LH 3) A 5-year national expansion of the Lighthouse research, accompanied by a study of best practices of state school board associations and board/superintendent teams in 8 states for developing board leadership for improving student learning.**

- **Purpose:** To build on and scale the learning from the Iowa Lighthouse Project across districts and states and to clearly define best practices for school boards and for the state associations in supporting them. By working with the other states in this project, Iowa will learn from an expanded implementation of the Lighthouse work how and when the interventions are most effective and what state school boards associations can do to scale up the Lighthouse implementation efficiently and effectively to large numbers of school districts.
- **Key questions include:** How can state school boards associations efficiently and effectively scale the Lighthouse interventions to large numbers of districts across a state? What does it take to create a state-wide focus on improving student achievement and what supports are necessary to sustain that focus (state school boards association, state education association, state administrators' association, etc.)? What kinds of effort does it take to support and sustain that focus and to build the effectiveness of boards and superintendents?
- **Process:** California, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky and Wisconsin will replicate the Lighthouse interventions from the Iowa project in districts across those states. State association staff from these state school boards associations are training with the Lighthouse staff on a quarterly basis to learn the interventions and practice implementing them before taking them to the districts in their states. In addition, Illinois, Missouri and Oregon are trying different interventions, but collecting the same data each year to measure impact. This will allow us to use data to identify where the work of the state association staff is having an impact on the boards, districts, and student achievement, and to analyze what was done with those districts where the impact was greatest in order to identify best practices in board leadership and development.
- **Common data that all states will monitor (at a minimum):**
  - changes in the district conditions for student achievement,
  - beliefs about what is possible to expect and what impacts student learning, and
  - levels of student achievement.
- **8 participating states:**

|              |             |
|--------------|-------------|
| ▪ California | ▪ Kentucky  |
| ▪ Idaho      | ▪ Missouri  |
| ▪ Illinois   | ▪ Oregon    |
| ▪ Iowa       | ▪ Wisconsin |